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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV VM

SUBJECT: MENNONITE PASTOR REPORTS ON DISSENTING MEMBERS AND
GOVERNMENT REGISTRATION PROGRESS

REF: HCMC 762

1. (SBU) Summary: In meetings with PolOfs, Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung, president of the Vietnam Mennonite Church (VMC), characterized relations as amiable between his church and government officials at central and provincial levels. Trung claims to represent the entirety of the 8,000-strong Mennonite church in Vietnam, with the exception of the breakaway church of imprisoned Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang. The two split after serious acrimony in mid-2004. Trung views as relatively positive Vietnam's new legal framework on religion and told us the VMC had applied for registration with the HCMC Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) in mid-July. He said he had received assistance from the HCMC CRA on the registration and expected the process to go smoothly. He was critical of Pastor Quang for mixing his own political views into purely religious matters. The more moderate Trung is generally respected within the local house church community; successful registration of his 112 churches would be a significant step forward. End Summary.

The Mennonites: A Brief History

2. (SBU) On July 19 and 21, PolOfs met with Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung, President of the Vietnam Mennonite Church (VMC), to discuss the impact of Vietnam's new legal framework on religion on his church. According to Pastor Trung, VMC has 8,000 believers nationwide who worship in 112 house churches in six dioceses. They are primarily concentrated in the southern provinces, around HCMC and in the Mekong Delta. Trung explained that the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the international church's wing for social work, began refugee relief work in the south in 1954. The Eastern Mennonite Mission, the division responsible for congregational development and pastoral training, came to Vietnam in 1957. Before 1975 the church was very active throughout South Vietnam, performing charity work and distributing free medicine. The MCC remained in Vietnam following the fall of Saigon.

Split in the Mennonite Church

3. (SBU) We held our second meeting with Trung two days after the partial demolition of Pastor Quang's home and house church (reftel). Trung said that his relationship with Quang had grown increasingly strained prior to Quang's arrest in June 2004. Trung is a pre-1975 VMC leader and was more senior in the VMC hierarchy than Quang, who joined the church much later. However, Trung said that when he served as president of the VMC Administrative Committee and Quang as vice president and general secretary beginning in June 2003, the two initially shared a cordial relationship. This did not last long. Trung and other house church leaders told us of infighting among VMC leaders over how far and how hard to agitate against GVN control over religion. Trung and Quang in particular clashed on this question; Trung preferred a more quiet, gradualist approach, while Quang was more of a firebrand in the eyes of Trung and his supporters.

4. (SBU) The split in the church occurred when four of Quang's associates, then VMC representatives, attempted to remove Trung as President, calling a hastily-organized and sparsely attended meeting in November 2004 after Quang's imprisonment. The board's other 10 representatives did not agree with the vote, according to Trung. The pastor stated he then impressed upon Quang's followers that religion and secular activities must remain separate. Trung said he believes Quang and his parishioners started to mix political and religious issues.

5. (SBU) Trung said he believes the negative votes from Quang's associates stemmed from Trung's alleged "sympathy" towards the GVN, a claim rooted in Trung's decision to engage with the GVN on registration under the new legal framework in spite of Quang's imprisonment. Trung has tried unsuccessfully to speak with Quang's wife, Le Thi Phu Dung, since her election to head the district 2 parish in June 2005, but he said that Dung made it clear that they had parted ways. Since then, she and Quang's followers have severed all contact with Pastor Trung and the Vietnamese Mennonite Church. Trung views her election as a church leader absurd because of her youth and lack of training. He sees Dung as a self-proclaimed teacher who lacks credibility in a larger Mennonite audience.

16. (SBU) Since 1997, Pastor Trung had tried annually to apply for legal recognition from the GVN. He only received a reply in 2004, when he was told that the central government was "considering" his request. Despite the GVN's acknowledgement of the 2004 application for recognition, Trung was required in 2005 to submit all application forms related to registration to the HCMC Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA). Trung told us he had done this by mid-July. He did not anticipate any problems in the process, adding that the HCMC CRA had been helpful. Trung said that on June 23, immediately prior to his submission of the registration application, the HCMC CRA met with him, along with Vietnam Southern Baptist Convention and Seventh Day Adventist leaders, to review instructions on registering their churches.

17. (SBU) Trung said he submitted applications for all 112 VMC churches, with the exception of Pastor Quang's HCMC district 2 church. He had offered to work with Quang's church to include it in the registration process, but Quang's parishioners reportedly refused to register until their pastor is released from jail. (NOTE: Quang was sentenced last November to three years in prison on charges of obstructing justice. END NOTE.) Trung said he had told Dung, Quang's wife and current leader of the district 2 house church, that she was putting the followers at risk by not registering the church as required by the Ordinance on Religion and Faith. In Trung's opinion, this refusal places "Quang above the religion."

18. (SBU) Comment: While Trung's claim to represent all but one of the 112 Mennonite house churches in Vietnam may be overstated, as Pastor Quang's activism has made him very popular among many house churches, Trung remains a respected leader, according to key contacts in the house church community. The rift between Trung and Quang over how to manage the VMC's relationship with the GVN mirrors experiences outside the Mennonite Church. We have seen the same tensions in other house church denominations, although not to the extent that it generated a formal split in the leadership. Should Trung successfully register the VMC with the GVN -- and then be able demonstrate that local officials subsequently are facilitating his churches' activities -- it would be a major step forward in convincing many fence-sitting house churches to move ahead as well. According to the legal framework on religion, in the case of a religious organization with churches in multiple provinces, the central-level CRA in Hanoi must rule within 60 days, or roughly late September or early October, in this case. Moreover, as a pre-1975 church, if and when registered, the VMC also would be eligible to apply for full recognition, which would grant the church additional rights. How the GVN plans to handle conversion from registration to recognition remains unclear at this time. End Comment.

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